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## **On duty or off, Guard Soldiers ‘always ready, always there’**

By Ann Keyes

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. – It was the first dusting of snow of the season, with southwest and central Missouri streets and highways covered in a thin layer of ice and snow. That morning, Dec. 6, four Missouri National Guard Soldiers headed northeast on Missouri 54 toward Jefferson City.

“The weather was cold, about 27 degrees, with snow falling and slick roads,” said Staff Sgt. Jason Lannan, a member of Springfield’s 1107<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group. “I was driving a government full-size van on Highway 54 towards Eldon when we came across a car on the side of the road with a lady talking on a cell phone. We slowed down to assess the situation. As we slowed down, Staff Sgt. Hammonds, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, shouted that there was a car flipped over in the ravine.”

“I was the senior person in the van,” said Staff Sgt. Kay Hammonds, a 24-year veteran of the military with the last 13 in the Missouri National Guard. “Staff Sgt. Lannan asked me if I wanted to stop and I said ‘yes.’ We were barely stopped and ‘Bam!’ - Staff Sgt. Nickels was halfway down the ravine.”

“Instead of waiting, you just do it,” said Nickels, who deployed to Iraq in 2003-2004 with the Missouri Guard’s 203<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion. Nickels, who joined the Guard in 2000, now serves with the aviation group.

“We didn’t plan,” said unit member Sgt. Keshee Jimenez, of Willard. “We just got out and started helping people.”

Two cars had slid into the ravine. An SUV had rolled, resting on its roof. While Jimenez secured the government van and contacted the unit’s chain of command, Lannan and Nickels went to work on the upturned vehicle’s occupants, Brian and Amy Miller, of Camdenton.

“Staff Sgt. Hammonds and Sgt. Jimenez assessed the outside of the SUV for hazards such as fuel leaks and fire. As soon as they told us there was no leak, Hammonds and Jimenez ran to the other car to check on the driver,” said Lannan. “I checked on the driver of the SUV by crawling through a broken window on the driver’s side. The driver said his ribs hurt and he thought they were broken. I hand-checked his body for blood and protruding objects or bone.”

Nickels assisted the passenger, Amy Miller, who was trying to exit the vehicle, but the door and window were crushed close to the ground. Amy noted stomach pain; she was having trouble communicating; and her foot was stuck. With the passenger window inaccessible, Nickels ran to the back of the SUV and alerted the others he was going to break the glass. While Lannan covered Brian with a blanket found in the car, Nickels broke the back window and climbed into the SUV to further check Amy for injuries.

The precarious situation got worse before it got better.



“As Staff Sgt. Nickels got more blankets from the trunk of the SUV, I heard a loud crash close to me,” said Marshfield resident Lannan. “I saw another truck that came off the road and crashed 15 yards from where Hammonds and Jimenez were checking the other car. Hammonds ran to the new crash. Immediately, there was a strong smell of fuel. Hammonds helped the gentleman out of the vehicle and made sure he was uninjured. Hammonds removed the man and his dog from the danger area of the truck.”

Jimenez, still communicating with the group’s unit in Springfield, grabbed a blue vest from the van and began directing traffic so as to avoid additional accidents. Lannan and Nickels wrapped the Millers in blankets and the Soldiers’ own clothing to keep the couple warm.

Once the Missouri Highway Patrol was on site, Jimenez gave them an update. Some 45 minutes after the events began to unfold, the Soldiers helped carry the victims up the ravine to a waiting fire truck.

“My wife and I are sure we wouldn’t be here, wouldn’t have survived without their help,” said Brian Miller of the actions of Citizen-Soldiers with the aviation group. It was very cold; we were cold. I feel shock and hypothermia would have set in if they hadn’t come along.”

Brian and Amy, still in recovery some two months after the accident, hope to meet their ‘Hometown Heroes’ sometime soon, although the couple wouldn’t know the Soldiers if they saw them.

“All my wife remembers are boots, knees and voices,” said Brian. “We don’t remember a whole lot, but they stayed with us.”

Lannan, Nickels, Hammonds and Jimenez were awarded Missouri Commendation Ribbons for their actions.

“In assisting Soldiers and first responders, Staff Sgt. Nickels’ quick, decisive actions led to the successful rescue of injured citizens. His immediate actions helped to ensure the safety and health of two motorists who were trapped in an overturned vehicle. Staff Sgt. Nickels’ actions bring great credit upon himself, the United States Army, the Missouri National Guard and the 1107<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group,” read Nickels award.

Nickels, of Laquey, as well as the other Soldiers, are quick to point out that accolades were the last thing on their mind that day in December.

“I’m just glad they’re okay,” said Nickels of the Millers.

“All the Soldiers did such an awesome job,” added Hammonds, of Springfield, herself a veteran of two overseas tours. “Isn’t that what the Guard is supposed to do?”

Staff Sgt. Dennis Chambers, a 17-year Army veteran with 15 years in the Missouri Guard, would answer with a resounding ‘yes.’



Just a month after the accident in Camden County, Chambers, of Nixa, was driving home from his fulltime job at the Guard armory in Springfield. While Chambers waited at a stoplight, a boy riding his bicycle crossed the intersection and was hit by a pick-up truck.

Chambers quickly pulled his car off the road into the right of way and rushed to 14-year-old Nathan Lee. Lee was unconscious as Chambers checked for injuries before a paramedic showed on the scene. Chambers then carefully moved the youngster's bike off the four-lane roadway, making note of the bike's position for law enforcement that had yet to arrive. Chambers then directed traffic and cleared a path for emergency responders.

An hour after the accident, with Lee in an ambulance headed for Springfield, Chambers, a father of three sons, said the adrenaline began to subside. He was quick to give credit for his actions to the Missouri National Guard, his training and the Soldiers he has served with both at home and abroad.

"Tonight's event reminds me how grateful I am to serve in the Missouri National Guard and how lucky I am to have learned from the people I have served with," said Chambers after the January 6 accident.

"Medics taught me first aid. Military police taught me how to direct traffic and manage a scene until help arrives. Supply taught me accountability and attention to detail. Signal taught me how to communicate effectively and efficiently. Engineers taught me to improvise and make the things I need. Operations people taught me to manage assets and use what I've got to accomplish the mission. Noncommissioned officers taught me to take charge when I need to and follow orders when I need to," Chambers said.

Lee's parents, Jasmine and James Lee, thanked Chambers in person when he visited their son in the hospital.

"Thank God for good Samaritans, people who would help our son," said James.

"Staff Sgt. Chambers is a go-to individual," said Capt. Aaron Larimore, Chambers' supervisor at the Missouri Guard's Department of Information Management. "At any time, day or night, when the mission calls he is the first to respond. He is one of our most technical individuals and he possesses the know-how and ability to accomplish whatever task is placed in his path. Chambers will at anytime stay the course and work on the behalf of others even when it is at his own expense. He is one of the most dedicated and caring individuals I have the pleasure of serving with in my military career."

Like Hammonds, Jimenez, Nickels and Lannan, Chambers brushes aside any talk of heroism.

"Life teaches me time and again that we do not get to pick the time we are called to help our fellow man, only that we will be called. Thanks to the Guard, the times I have been called, I have always had the knowledge and skills to help out," said Chambers.

For more information about the Missouri National Guard, please visit [www.moguard.com](http://www.moguard.com) and our social media sites: [www.facebook.com/Missouri.National.Guard](https://www.facebook.com/Missouri.National.Guard); [www.twitter.com/Missouri\\_NG](https://www.twitter.com/Missouri_NG);



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**Sgt. Keshee Jimenez, Staff Sgt. Jason Lannon, Staff Sgt. Josh Nickels and Staff Sgt. Kay Hammonds receive the Missouri Commendation Award for assisting victims of a car accident in central Missouri December 6. Brian Miller, of Camdenton, gives credit to the Missouri Guard Soldiers for saving his life. (Ann Keyes/Missouri National Guard)**



**Staff Sgt. Josh Nickels (right) and Staff Sgt. Kay Hammonds (center) accept Missouri Commendation Awards for service to civilian members of the Missouri community. Nickels and**



**Hammonds, along with two other Missouri National Guard Soldiers, assisted victims of a car accident December 6 in central Missouri. (Ann Keyes/Missouri National Guard)**



**Staff Sgt. Dennis Chambers credits his Missouri National Guard training and other Citizen-Soldiers for his quick reaction to a civilian traffic accident in Nixa, Missouri, Jan. 6, 2012. (Ann Keyes/Missouri National Guard)**